

Romance in the Air Combined With Sudden Turns and Surprises Which Involve Both Mystery and Action.

NON-STOP

BY
EDWIN BALMER.

PAUL CRANSTON was alone in his airdrome in a meadow beside the new concrete Northwest trail out of Chicago, where trucks and motor cars rushed by.

"Hi!" invited Paul's big placard beside the concrete. "Drive in and fly!" But no one drove in; so Paul wiped his hands and sat down in the shade of a wing and snapped the string around the brown paper containing his lunch.

He ate the fruit first and was considering whether he would eat anything more, when he noticed that a new roadster had turned from the road and was circling over the dry grass of his field.

"Good morning; where's the pilot?" this girl greeted him.

"I am the pilot," Paul replied.

"Where's Paul Cranston, I mean?" she corrected, with plain indication that Paul Cranston would not be this oil and sweat stained man in khaki.

"I am Paul Cranston."

"Oh," she took his word for it, then apologized. "I'm sure I beg your pardon. I'd read about you, you see; and just now driving in with the sun in my eyes—"

"Of course, I see," Paul put in, and he did, for he knew what she had read about him.

It was a decidedly flattering write-up of the Cranstons in general, which had appeared in the Chicago papers when he started his flying field a couple of months ago. Not having a great deal to say for Paul himself, except that he had been trained during the war and had flown in France, the newspapers naturally made much of the fact that he was of the Providence Cranstons, and so this girl had natural expectations of a far more impressive person than Paul.

"However, since you are Mr. Cranston," she went on practically, "shall we get down to business?"

"That's what I'm here for," Paul admitted.

"All right then; do you take on special commissions?"

"For flight?"

"Of course; but to special places and under special conditions?"

"Yes; I can."

"And you can keep it quiet? Not say a word about it?"

"Certainly I can, if you wish," Paul agreed.

"You'll fly me to Detroit before 4 o'clock, then? I simply have to be there by 5, or the train we are trying at all. And—well, I simply have to make it. So if you can get me there, and keep it absolutely quiet, name your own figure."

"Step down," Paul invited.

"You mean you'll do it?"

"Non-stop to Detroit is a fairly large order," Paul admitted, "but for an adequate reason I can do it."

"Believe me, this reason's adequate," the girl said, and stepped down.

Interest beyond his sense of duty to record the identity of any one leaving property in his care.

She hesitated a second. "P. Alden," she said then.

"Pheobe," challenged Jim.

"Priscilla," she corrected.

"Address?"

Again she hesitated. "Plymouth, Massachusetts," Paul supplied.

Her dark eyes rested on him with appreciation. "How did you know?" she asked.

"Register, as Shelby Selkirk of course, and get your package for you."

She nodded slightly as though saying, "I thought so."

"If you're going to register as 'Shel,'" she suggested politely, "hadn't you better change to more ordinary attire? They don't know Shel at the Tournaine; yet they'll probably expect him in ordinary clothes?"

"Where'll I get ordinary clothes?" Paul returned.

"Store."

"I haven't enough money," Paul admitted.

"I have," Priscilla assured him, and told the driver: "Stop at the first men's

clothing store where you can get quick service."

The man put on the brakes almost immediately, and Priscilla got out and, when Paul followed her to the door of the clothing store, she told a salesman to show a gray business suit to the gentleman.

The salesman supposed the gentleman to be the lady's husband, and Paul let it go at that; he took a gray suit into a dressing room, put it on and appeared again to Priscilla, who instantly approved and paid for the suit and also for a cap to match.

Paul throttled down and diminished the racket so that he could be heard when he called, "Ready?" She replied steadily: "Go ahead. I glad I learned that!"

"What?" asked Paul.

"How to crank. If we have to come down, I can do it now."

"Don't you think of it!" yelled Paul, and as Jim kicked away the blocking he opened the throttle, and up they flew, and almost immediately they reached the air over the edge of the lake.

Usually Paul explained to a passenger that she was likely to feel a few "bumps" over the edge of the water on a day like this. He had not warned this girl, and here were the "bumps" rocking them, tossing them, tilting them sideways, dropping them. This girl, though unwarmed, merely held tight to the sides of the seat and smiled when Paul turned to her. He steered the airplane into the smooth, easy going over the deep water.

She was perhaps twenty-two, a dark-haired, dark-eyed girl of an interesting type which Paul had been noticing frequently since he came to Chicago.

She was garbed entirely in white.

Her slim, well-shaped hands wore white kid gauntlets—a rank extravagance when driving. He could not see her hands, therefore, but he had no fear that they were worn from work. Her small feet were in white buckskin oxfords of special hand-made last, and her white silk hat was a particularly smart, small creation.

Glancing from her to the car, Paul observed that it had a custom-built body on the most notoriously expensive of chassis. Beyond any doubt, and assuming that her start was on some polyglot tenement street, somebody close to her had prospered.

Papa probably, Paul thought. He put the beginning of her epoch of prosperity before her marriageable age—about the time she was fourteen. That would have given papa opportunity to enter her at some extra-graduate finishing school.

"The distance to Detroit," said Paul, "is only a matter of additional oil and gas. It is a risky, indeed, that if you come to me to hop you to Detroit, on a non-stop flight, for the fun of it, I would not be justified. If anything happened, on the other hand, if it was to save a life or some one's happiness, there would be justification."

"In other words, you want to know why I've got to get to Detroit so quickly," she said. "Well, if I tell you, how about the professional secrecy?"

"What?" said Paul.

"Like a lawyer, Papa can go to his lawyer with any old thing, no matter how raw it is, as I understand it, and tell it, and that lawyer simply can't repeat a word. Can a pilot be like that?"

"Oh," said Paul. "Well, this one can try."

"You won't even tell your wife?"

"All right. I have to be in Detroit by 4 to rob the mails. That's all."

"What?" said Paul, slightly staggered, for he realized she wasn't joking.

"Oh, I just have to get back a package I mailed from here special delivery first thing this morning to a party who will call for it at a hotel at 4 o'clock this afternoon. I can't assure you that you're running the risk to save a life; but since you've been dragged in happiness—"

"She stopped and looked away.

"Thank you," said Paul. "Shall we hop straight across the lake or go around. Hopping across, carrying ordinary landing gear, has its disadvantages if anything happens over water; but on the other hand, it makes it maybe 50 per cent more certain you'll reach your hotel before 4 o'clock."

"Then let's have it straight across," she decided, drawing a deep breath.

Paul stopped to a post and rang a bell.

"What's that?" she demanded.

"For my mechanic. He takes his lunch at the farmhouse."

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